

A "SECULAR SCRIPTURE,"
THE GENESIS OF ROGER DE LILLE'S

HISTOIRE ANCIENNE

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Access to the early thirteenth-century Old French ancient history discovered by Paul Meyer in 1885 was until recently available only in distinguished manuscript collections.¹ This important work is still in the process of being edited. The Genesis, or introductory section of a copy which preserves an early state of the text, however, is now available in an edition by this author.²

Northrop Frye's expression, a "secular scripture," used in a slightly different sense, aptly characterizes this opening portion of Roger's history.³ The Histoire's Genesis is both scriptural and secular in three senses: first, the author weaves simultaneous secular history, as outlined by Eusebius, into the sacred story; second, he uses biblical material for a secular purpose, as high entertainment; third, he creates a narrative that resembles a romance, while stressing the typology of Christ as understood in his time.

The author, who seems identical with the narrator, acts as teacher and moral counselor. In these roles, the creator of the modified scriptural episodes, strung together as supposed chronology, handles his material differently from that of his sources.⁴ Biblical and secular tales are augmented and embellished to achieve the desired effect upon the Histoire's first

listeners, for it is clear to the reader of an early state of the text that this history was intended to be delivered a haute voix.⁵

I. The Genesis as Secular and Sacred History

How does this Genesis ordered by Roger de Lille compare with secular history as understood in the author's day? This vernacular narration purports to recount universal history from the Creation up to Julius Caesar. Though designed for a secular purpose, it treats the origin and destiny of humankind. A universal history, it does not commemorate events of a recent past, as pagan historians had done. Chronology and eschatology are conflated, for history is meant to inform and edify the faithful.⁶ Medieval accounts of world history opened with the Genesis story. The Old Testament, for the Christian historian, was a foretelling, an historical prefiguration of the rolling out of subsequent events. Hebrew history foreordained subsequent "mighty acts of God." The New Testament could be fully understood only by a familiarity with the Genesis and other Old Testament narratives and prophecies.

In considering chronology as sacred and biblical history as secular, Roger's clerk follows the example of Latin Christian chronologists in preceding centuries. Both Freculphus of Lisieux's Chronicle of about 825 A.D. and Otto of Freising's The Two Cities of the mid-twelfth century recount history as opening with the Genesis narrative of Creation.⁷ Nor does this formula cease to be used by post-medieval "historians." Sir Walter Raleigh, writing as a prisoner in the Tower of London, begins his History of the World with the Genesis.⁸ Even Bossuet in his Discours sur l'histoire universelle of 1681, like Roger's historiographer and Raleigh, uses an

intercalation of Genesis material and secular history in Part I and the first two chapters of Part II.⁹

The compiler of the Histoire ancienne enumerates the chronologically appropriate kings and reigns in the secular world, as juxtaposed to Hebrew history in Jeromes's Interpretate of Eusebius's Chronici canones. He borrows from Orosius and Isidore for other secular materials.¹⁰ The Genesis of Peter Comestor's Historia scholastica contributes a goodly share of secular history to the narrative of Roger's clerk. Josephus's Latin Antiquities consistently provides an embroidery of biblical materials. Awareness of the listeners and the inclusion of a considerable amount of secular material make Roger's Genesis vastly different from an Old French translation of Scripture, such as that of the Crusader Arsenal Bible.¹¹

What, then, distinguishes the Old French historical Genesis of the Histoire ancienne is not that it lacks predecessors or successors who use the biblical Genesis as an introduction to historical narration. The difference is that Roger's history was designed primarily to be heard, rather than read, by its public. Unlike preceding attempts at world chronology, this thirteenth-century work uses the common parlance, rather than the Latin of scholars. It was composed during that brief period between two types of historical writing comparable in content, both of which were intended for readers. Emerging from scholarly Latin chronicles, as exemplified by the works of Freculphus and Otto, the Histoire ancienne's Genesis is an adaptation into Old French for the oral instruction and enjoyment of persons of sophisticated taste, persons who demanded a history in prose. This public perceived poetry, the medium of the romances, to be the language

of fantasy, rather than fact.¹² This window of time for oral delivery was small. In an early state of the text, as exemplified by MS. fr 20125 in the National Library in Paris, a listener's text, direct address formulae occur frequently.¹³ Subsequent copies were gradually adapted for an owner who read the common language, as a literate aristocracy emerged during the 13th century. The prologue and verse moralizations are eliminated or incorporated into the text as ill-disguised prose. The frequent expressions directed to listeners diminish or disappear.¹⁴ Comparison of two manuscripts of the Histoire ancienne in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, MS. fr. 20125 (ca. 1287), which preserves an old state of the text, and the reading-collector's copy, MS. 246 (dated 1364), reveals the elimination of evidence of oral delivery found in the earlier copy and the substitution of aids to the reader in the more recent of the two texts, though the two are separated in time by less than a century. The copy for the literate owner eliminates "Seigneurs" 72 out of 81 times, as used in Paris 20125. "Bel segnor" and "Segnors e dames" are never used. There is no trace of verse moralizations, even as prose. In place of a prologue we find a résumé of what is to follow, a long table of contents, and a list of rubrics. The owner of MS. 246 could now read for himself his copy of this secular history, which owes much to sacred story. He could learn from the text as well as enjoy the miniature illustrations, as did the owner of MS. 20125.

II. The "Histoire ancienne" Genesis as Entertainment

In his recitation of a secular version of the Genesis story, the oral presenter was no longer the decorous reader of Holy Scripture. He could make his listeners sigh or smile as he touched or amused them. He could ask a question and expect a reply. The Genesis narrative, familiar to most, is here transmitted in familiar language, with heroes and heroines who engage in courtly conversation or participate in chevaleresque exploits.¹⁵ A séance for the enjoyment of Roger's history must have been highly entertaining for the sophisticated audience, with a new interest in history, who enjoyed the leisure of long story-telling hours at the Court at Lille. Though this Genesis may be viewed as a chronological narrative which presents scriptural patriarchs and matriarchs as exemplars of moral behavior, it is at the same time a series of embroidered episodes threaded together and deftly tailored to the listener's taste. Its stories are personally applicable to each member of the audience and equally understandable as chronology of the human earthly pilgrimage. How appealing are the human foibles of Cain's jealousy, Jacob's betrayal of Esau in order to become the designated heir, of his ruse to gain more sheep than Laban and, above all, of the frustrated passion of Potiphar's lustful wife.¹⁶ Disguise and mistaken identity entertained Roger's guests as they intrigue us today: Jacob dresses in festival clothing to deceive his father Isaac; Joseph's brothers do not recognize in Pharaoh's powerful counsellor, before whom they tremble, the young brother they sold as a slave after throwing him into the well.¹⁷ The heart-warming

stories of forgiveness are equally touching: Esau receives with affection his crafty brother Jacob after a long separation; Joseph pardons and embraces his brothers whose evil deeds, he says, God used for a greater good.¹⁸ The biblical narratives, so human in their appeal, must have been more directly touching to a contemporary audience who heard expanded interpretation in the vernacular and tasted their medieval flavor.

These and other dramatic narratives of the patriarchs were doubtless familiar to listeners as part of the biblical heritage. Roger's clerk, however, has greatly elongated and enlivened certain stories to please his audience. The account of Joseph's resistance to Potiphar's wife, for example, though based on the dramatic account of Josephus, is lengthened and embellished, as a narrative sure to fascinate persons accustomed to courtly romances. The Histoire ancienne's version of the séduction manquée is over twice as long as its source in Josephus's Latin Antiquities and almost eight times as long as the original Vulgate version.¹⁹ The author of the Histoire ancienne secularizes the Scripture by dramatizing, embroidering and lengthening certain narratives of his sources which he deems likely to please those enjoying the recitation.

Taking advantage of the attention aroused by particularly absorbing tales, the compiler-narrator adds bits of moral commentary. He begs his listeners not to imitate Adam, who yielded to a fateful temptation, and thus brought misery to all.²⁰ After his narration of Pharaoh's dreams of the lean years to come, the story-teller reminds his audience of the doubtful love of a friend who forgets his pledge to his good friend in trouble. By implication, he advises the listener to avoid such behavior

as that of the wine steward who, after two years, suddenly remembered his fellow-prisoner, Joseph, whom he had promised to ask the King to release.²¹ The narrator of the Histoire ancienne Genesis frequently provides, along with entertainment, advice that would promote better living.

III. The Typological Nature of "Histoire ancienne" Genesis Stories

Christ typology shines through narratives of Roger's Genesis. The medieval man was aware that the sacrifice manqué of Isaac, Abraham's son and heir, along with the symbolic ram caught in the bramble bush, somehow foreshadowed the real saving act of God to come. The story of Noah's Flood was recognized as a type of salvation through Baptism and the Church, with Noah representing the saving Person.²² The writer does not content himself with merely recounting "prefiguration" stories of the Genesis, but makes sure, at least in the Joseph story, that the listener is instructed in how closely the Genesis is related to the Christ figure. Joseph, the aristocratic favorite son of the chief patriarch of the Hebrews, is betrayed, sold into slavery by Judas for thirty pieces of silver (viginti argenteis in the Vulgate) to become a "suffering servant"; he is unjustly arrested, condemned and thrown into prison, abandoned by his friends. He is "resurrected," honored and recognized as the savior of his brethren whom he forgives and finally brings to himself in Egypt. The secular dramatic appeal of the Joseph story is enhanced by an intentional intensification of its Christ typology.

The historiographer's freedom to fulfill a secular purpose allows the author of the

Histoire ancienne not only to attempt a reconstruction of chronological events in the life story of mankind on Earth, but also to bring in non-biblical events. The writer or narrator is at liberty greatly to embellish the already fascinating Genesis narratives in order to attract and retain the attention of his listeners. He is free to present the Christ typology of the Joseph story in an unmistakable way, as high romance, all the while exercising his own power to guide his listeners in their personal lives. And all this he does in the lyrical cadence of an Old French style which falls easily on the ear. If only we could once again hear it read aloud by its obviously talented narrator.

NOTES

1. Romania, (1885), 14, 1ff, esp. 36-76.
2. M. C. Joslin, The Heard Word: a Moralized History, the Genesis Section of the "Histoire ancienne" in a Text from Saint-Jean d'Acre. University, Mississippi: Romance Monographs, Inc., 1986, hereafter referred to as H.W. For information on all manuscripts containing the Genesis, see D. Oltrogge, Die Illustrationszyklen zur Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César (1250-1400) Frankfurt: Lang, 1989.
3. Frye calls "secular scripture" "A body of stories with a distinctive authority . . . with a special kind of seriousness. The Secular Scripture (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978), 7. Here, this expression is used to denote a biblically-related narrative,

translated into vernacular and adapted for use in a secular situation. The authority and seriousness of the original biblical stories were of course unquestioned by both author and public of the Histoire ancienne.

4. Three principal Latin sources provide the author with this biblical narration, the Latin Antiquities of Josephus, the Genesis portion of Peter Comestor's Historia scholastica and the Genesis of the Vulgate. See H.W., ch. 4 and bibliography.
5. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. fr. 20125 is the text on which we base these comments.
6. For a comparison of pagan and Christian history, see The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century, ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 83ff.
7. For Freculphus, see P.L. 106. 915-947. For Otto of Freising, The Two Cities, a Chronicle of Universal History to the year 1146 A.D., trans. and notes C. C. Mierow (New York: Columbia UP, 1928).
8. Sir Walter Raleigh, The History of the World, ed. C. A. Patrides (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1971), Book I.
9. (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966). See series editor's preface for Discourse on Universal History, trans. E. Forster, ed. O. Ranum (Chicago: U of Chicago P).
10. See H.W., ch. 4 for a more precise indication of sources.

11. Paris, Arsenal MS. 5211
12. For a discussion of the preference for prose as a more accurate medium of instruction than poetry in Flanders during the late 12th and early 13th centuries, see B. Woledge and H. P. Clive, Repertoire des plus anciens textes en prose française depuis 842 jusqu'aux premières années du XIIIe siècle (Geneva: Droz, 1964), 27-29; H. J. Chaytor, From Script to Print; An Introduction to Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1945) 83-84; Ronald N. Walpole, An Anonymous Old French Translation of the Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle (Cambridge: Mediaeval Academy, 1979), 6.
13. Though not the earliest text we know, Paris, B.N. fr. 20125, preserves more nearly an old fashioned form, designed for oral delivery, than other manuscripts copied earlier in the century. Jaroslav Folda dates this MS. ca. 1287. Copies at Dijon (B.M. 562) and at Brussels (B.R. 10175) are dated around or before 1275 by Hugo Buchthal. See Folda, Crusader Manuscript Illumination at Saint-Jean d'Acre, 1275-1291 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976), Catalogue, 188, and Buchthal, Miniature Painting in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (London: Pindar, 1986), Catalogue 16 and 17, 148 ff.
14. For comment on the successive suppression of oral formulae in the Histoire ancienne recension, see P. Meyer, 58.
15. For examples, read Joseph's reply to Potiphar's lustful wife (H.W., 232.21-29) and the pursuit of Joseph's steward after

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the brothers who are returning home unaware that Benjamin's sack contains the silver cup (255.29-31).

16. H.W., 88.8-13; 186.29-187.14;
196.30-197.19; 232.21-29.
17. H.W., 186.11-15; 249.13-16.
18. H.W., 207.1-4; 262.13-34.
19. H.W., 231.19-236.12; Franz Blatt, ed. The Latin Josephus I, Introduction and Text, The Antiquities: Bk. 2, 4; Gen. 39.6-20.
20. H.W., 86.3-28.
21. H.W., 238.17-20 and 239.33-240.1.
22. H.W., 86.16-18; 239.33-240.5.